



# **New South Wales Neighbourhood & Community Centre Policy**

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August 2024

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

The office of the Local Community Services Association (LCSA) is based on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

LCSA acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognises their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that they never ceded sovereignty

Always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

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## **Local Community Services Association (LCSA)**

Local Community Services Association (LCSA) is the peak body and membership organisation for Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) and other local community organisations in NSW.

Our purpose is to represent the interests of our diverse place-based, locally governed member organisations with a particular emphasis on community development. LCSA's organisational vision is "vibrant local community organisations supporting stronger, more inclusive communities".

# NSW Neighbourhood and Community Centre Policy

Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) in NSW are community led, not-for-profit organisations that work with local people to build safe, strong, resilient and connected communities. They are place based and deeply embedded in their local areas. NCCs are both essential social infrastructure across NSW and an essential part of a diverse, capable and responsive community services system.

This Local Community Services Association (LCSA) NSW Neighbourhood and Community Centre Policy has been developed in consultation with members, government and other community services associations and forms part of a policy suite LCSA provides for members.

The Policy provides member centres in NSW with a broad framework to guide their role and functions as they work towards meeting their community's aspirations and diverse needs while maintaining sustainable and efficient operations.<sup>1</sup> This policy does not address the issues facing centres, but rather provides a vision and direction for their future and sustainability.

LCSA is the peak membership body for NCCs and other locally based, community-governed organisations in NSW. LCSA has a range of member organisations and LCSA's constitution defines full members as neighbourhood centres; or community governed organisations that focus on community development, social inclusion and community focussed services; or regional bodies such as sector development organisations. The focus of this policy is on members who identify and are recognised by their peers as neighbourhood and community centres.<sup>2</sup>

LCSA provides a range of services, resources and networking opportunities, advocates on behalf of members to government, conducts policy and research on locally based programs and community development and offers free or low-cost training and development as well as study exchanges. This network of member NCCs makes up the largest community-led social infrastructure in NSW.

## 1. Vision for Neighbourhood and Community Centres in NSW

Neighbourhood and community centres (NCCs) are an essential part of a diverse and productive community sector in NSW, that addresses at a local level, issues of social justice, environmental sustainability and self-determination. They believe that local communities should have full agency over their local prosperity and well-being and play a key role in fostering community resilience.

NCCs are independent, locally based, locally governed organisations that build vibrant, inclusive and cohesive communities by providing essential social infrastructure, community-led leadership and critical community services.

They are community-driven not-for-profit organisations that engage with the community to develop and deliver activities and services focussed on the aspirations and wellbeing of all community members, particularly vulnerable individuals, families and community groups. They build capacity and empower communities to meet their own needs. NCCs provide trusted public spaces across NSW that are inclusive and respectful places for people to connect, belong, participate and be supported.

Above all, NCCs prioritise community development approaches and affirmative action for the most disadvantaged, marginalised and least powerful groups and individuals in the community. The wisdom, knowledge and custodianship of First Nations people and their deep connection to place and country is recognised and valued by all NCCs.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Neighbourhood and Community Centre' (NCC) refers to organisations across NSW which may have a variety of names and appearances including neighbourhood centres, community centres, community hubs, neighbourhood houses or neighbourhood services.

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to the LCSA website to view the LCSA Constitution and membership list and details.

## 2. Guiding Principles for Neighbourhood and Community Centres

NSW NCCs form part of a global movement of community organisations under the umbrella of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS), an international peak body that has consultative status with the United Nations, and Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA), a national network of over one thousand organisations in Australia.

Consistent with these global and national organisations, NSW NCCs uphold the principles of:

- Social Justice
- Human Rights
- Community Participation
- Diversity and Affirmative Action
- Local Governance and Democracy.

Underpinning the work of member NCCs in NSW are these key principles:

<b>Self-determination and Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The right of First Nations people to self-determination underpins all that NCCs aim towards.</li> <li>• NCCs believe in the right of all people to shape their own lives and strive to meet their own needs and aspirations and that local communities should have full agency over their local prosperity and well-being, playing a key role in fostering community resilience.</li> </ul>
<b>Accessible and Inclusive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NCCs are secular, non-partisan, non-discriminatory community-based organisations that are culturally sensitive and celebrate diversity.</li> <li>• All NCCs practices and policies promote access to the most vulnerable and marginalised people in the community.</li> </ul>
<b>Community Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NCCs engage and partner with the community to deeply understand and serve their needs and aspirations while also recognising the expertise and knowledge of the community itself.</li> <li>• NCCs are boundary-spanning organisations that connect local communities with local businesses, community organisations, government agencies and educational institutions.</li> </ul>
<b>Locally Governed and Democratic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NCCs are locally based and locally governed community organisations that allow people to join as members and stand and vote for a democratically elected committee.</li> <li>• Democratic principles apply when NCCs identify, develop and deliver activities that serve the local community.</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NCCs strive for social, economic, and environmental sustainability within their communities and at a broader level.</li> <li>• At an organisational level NCCs operate ethically and sustainably.</li> </ul>

### 3. What Makes NSW Neighbourhood and Community Centres Unique?

NCCs form part of the largest social infrastructure network in NSW. They offer a friendly place in the community for people to connect, seek advice or assistance or to access a needed service.

Centres are deeply embedded in their community and the local service system. They identify local strengths and priorities and design, coordinate and implement strategies and solutions that build community capacity, including to support vulnerable people. They are a trusted resource in the community.

NCCs in NSW embody several distinct characteristics:

- **Independence and Local Governance:** NCCs operate independently and are governed locally, ensuring decisions are reflective of community aspirations and priorities.
- **Community Development Principles:** They adhere to community development principles, shaping their activities and services to foster community empowerment and resilience.
- **Strength based:** NCCs value and nurture both the community's and an individual's strengths and lived experience to ensure a positive approach to service development.
- **Community Engagement and Advocacy:** NCCs prioritise community engagement and active listening, driving advocacy efforts and the development of responsive services.
- **Place based focus:** NCCs have a geographic focus and are able to respond nimbly to local needs and issues, targeting the specific circumstances of a place.
- **Building Trust and Resilience:** They cultivate trust and connections within local communities, enhancing community resilience through inclusive practices.
- **Local Responsiveness:** NCCs are locally driven, identifying gaps and co-developing strategies with the community to address local needs effectively.
- **Leadership and Advocacy:** They play leadership roles within their communities, advocating for community interests and representing community voices.
- **Responsive to Emerging Issues:** NCCs are agile in responding to emerging issues and opportunities, adapting quickly to changing community needs.
- **Part of a Larger Network:** They form the backbone of a vast social infrastructure network of local, independent organisations in NSW.
- **Collaborative Partnerships:** NCCs prioritise collaborative partnerships with stakeholders to enhance community services and infrastructure.
- **Identity as Neighbourhood or Community Centres:** They self-identify as neighbourhood or community centres focusing on an identified geographic area and are recognised by peers and LCSA as a NCC.

## 4. Organisational Characteristics

NCCs are independent, autonomous organisations that make business decisions in the best interests of their members, based on their priorities, policies and available resources.

### Physical Base

NCCs are primarily geographically focused organisations, based within a defined area, such as a small neighbourhood, a cluster of neighbourhoods or an area with a natural geographic boundary. Key to their work is their physical presence and the visibility of a 'centre' that acts as a hub or focal point for the community.

NCCs are safe places where community members know they are welcome. They may operate multiple neighbourhood or community centres in an area or just the one centre. They can also be mobile, going into communities and setting up temporarily in a local hall or park for the duration of an activity (known as outreach). In many places, particularly in regional NSW, a NCC may be the only community organisation based in that town.

Many offer meeting rooms and community spaces for groups to meet and facilitate discussions and connections. Centres also provide offices, meeting rooms or halls and community access to computers, photocopiers, video and music recording or other media equipment. Opening hours and the times of activities are determined by the NCC and the needs of the community.

### Governance and Legal Framework

A fundamental and unique feature of NCCs is that they are independent community-based, locally governed not-for-profit organisations with a strong commitment to community development.

NCCs often have a formal membership base which is drawn from the local community and aspires to reflect the diversity of that local community. Management boards or committees are democratically elected from the membership base, which ensures the local community has governance over the centre and the services and activities it provides. While not all NCCs have a structure where the community are official 'members' of the organisation, e.g. companies limited by guarantee, what all NCCs do have in common is a commitment to the local community and ensuring that their community's voice is heard in their decision making.

NCCs are autonomous organisations that take responsibility for their own good governance. They are established as legal entities either as associations, companies, co-operatives or collectives and must comply with a range of specific laws and regulations. They have a constitution that identifies amongst other matters the agreed goals and aims of the organisation.

It is the responsibility of the committee to ensure that the organisation is managed effectively, that they abide by their ethical and legal responsibilities, and they act in the best interest of the NCC.

Some centres may come under the legal umbrella of local government, large faith-based organisations or other institutions.<sup>3</sup> Centres operated in this way are generally not considered to be NCCs according to this Policy as they may not: a) be locally governed; b) be secular or c) have a strong organisational commitment to community development.

NCCs take a continuous improvement approach where they regularly evaluate and improve programs and services. They also ensure risks and opportunities around organisational sustainability issues are managed effectively.

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<sup>3</sup> NCCs falling under these arrangements are acknowledged in LCSA's constitution as Associate Members.

## **Human Resources**

NCCs run on 'people power'. This people power is both the paid workforce and the volunteer workforce.

NCCs have a legal and industrial obligation to have operational policies, procedures and delegations that make for good working relationships and fair working conditions for staff. Policies must ensure transparent and fair processes when employing and managing staff including adhering to principles of non-discrimination, equal employment opportunities, safe work practices and reasonable adjustment.

Volunteers play an integral role and offer a range of skills and support to NCCs. They assist with the running and development of services, help in the office or have specific support roles such as reception or finances. Volunteers are also bound by the policies and procedures of the NCC.

A large part of an NCCs sustainability and longevity is achieved through the investment in the well-being and needs of staff, volunteers and committee members through lifelong learning and promoting a work/life balance.

## **Funding**

NCCs currently operate using a variety of funding sources. Some centres operate on local contributions alone or have a mix of small grants while others receive grants from all levels of government for a range of projects and services. NCCs also access financial resources from service clubs, corporate sponsorship, philanthropy and fundraising activities.

Many community centres are formally registered as charities and benevolent public institutions in Australia due to their critical role in enriching and supporting local communities. However, not all NCCs have Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status which would enable them to receive tax deductible donations as a source of revenue. This is despite centres advocating for change regarding inequality, poverty and social justice (a condition for DGR Status).

LCSA member organisations are by default considered members of the Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA) and therefore have access to the ANHCA Public Fund which does have DGR status for donations. The ANHCA Public Fund is a channel NCCs can use to accept tax deductible donations or apply for grants from philanthropic foundations/trusts and corporations that require DGR tax status.<sup>4</sup>

Some NCCs in NSW receive very little funding or no funding at all to operate. These centres are run by volunteers only.

With governments continuing to take a strong approach to contracting out direct services, NCCs have been well placed to access grants to deliver specific services, particularly in the aged, children's and disability services areas. This has resulted in many NCCs now focusing on direct service delivery at the expense of their more preventative community development role.

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<sup>4</sup> ANHCA has been listed as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) since 1 July 2013. It is covered by Item 1 of the table in section 30-15 of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997. This ensures donations of \$2 or more to the ANHCA Public Fund for DGR are tax deductible.

## 5. Core Activities of Neighbourhood and Community Centres

As all communities are different, all NCCs are different, tailoring their activities to local needs and aspirations. There is no one size fits all approach, so each NCC is as unique as the communities in which they operate. What a NCC actually does on a day-to-day basis will depend on:

- the community's aspirations and priorities
- the priorities of other service providers, partners and stakeholders in the location
- the availability of resources including paid and unpaid staff, skills, facilities, funds and equipment
- external impacts such as floods, bushfires, pandemics, local industry closures.

However, there are common activities undertaken across NCCs and these core activities are at the heart of what makes a neighbourhood or community centre. The activities of NCCs can be grouped into four key areas:

- Connecting with the community
- Leading and empowering leaders in the community
- Designing and delivering services
- Responding to crises (individual and community).

### **Connecting with the Community**

NCCs adopt a community development approach to their work, where connecting and engaging authentically with their communities and facilitating connections between community members are a priority.

By providing an inclusive space in the community and a range of activities and services, community members can come together, develop local networks and seek support (both formal and informal). These opportunities breakdown social isolation and loneliness and encourages local people to participate in their community. NCCs also provide opportunities for participation through volunteering, gaining work experience and paid employment.

Seeking the views of the community both formally and informally about their needs and issues, what services and programs are required and how they should be delivered is core work of an NCC. Authentic engagement builds trust within the community and gives the NCC authority to work and advocate on behalf of the community to facilitate change.

Developing local networks and partnerships with a range of other community organisations and local businesses, strengthens NCCs capacity to respond to local issues and needs.

A community development approach creates trust with the local community and other service partners, which promotes a culture of information and knowledge sharing and in return builds stronger, more resilient communities and community networks (building social capital). It also builds a greater level of empowerment for individuals, groups and the wider community to find and strengthen their voice and take collective action.

### **Leading and Empowering Leaders in the Community**

NCCs have in-depth knowledge of their communities, through developing community connections and gathering local knowledge, that allows them to advocate with and on behalf of the community with credibility. They advocate for change and facilitate responses to meet local needs and aspirations. This leadership role that NCCs play is crucial to creating the conditions for community led change which is a key role of NCCs.

NCCs advocate to influence decisions that impact on community life, facilitate the provision of activities and services to respond to local needs and develop partnerships with local organisations (NGO, government and commercial) to deliver services that build a vibrant community. All the while engaging and empowering the community in this work.

NCCs support and empower the community to strengthen their voice, advocate for themselves and shape their local environment. NCCs also support and develop individuals to be active participants in decision making and in leadership roles, both within the organisation or for other causes.

Facilitating the engagement of all levels of government, NGO service providers and local businesses in the community, allows the NCC to act as an anchor organisation in the community - a hub where the NCC directly provides services and other providers can co-locate and respond to local aspirations.

Developing and cultivating volunteers is a large part of empowering leadership. A NCC can provide a range of opportunities for volunteers in leadership, skill development and increasing their engagement with the local community. Volunteers also assist a NCC in its service development and management functions.

### **Designing and Delivering Services**

All NCCs are essential social infrastructure and provide a diverse range of services depending on local aspirations and priorities.

Based on data from LCSA NCC Censuses<sup>5</sup> the following is an example of the range of services and activities offered by a NCC:

Community development projects	Information and (assisted) referrals
Volunteer program	Public computer/internet access
Health and wellbeing programs	Art & craft activities
Social inclusion groups	Life skills programs (incl resilience)
Parenting courses/groups	Material aid/relief (e.g. food, vouchers)
Children's services	Youth programs
Seniors' groups	Food security projects
Recreation/leisure activities	Indigenous groups/services
Personal counselling/support	Environmental sustainability projects
Literacy & numeracy projects	Social enterprises

NCCs act as a gateway and are often the first place of contact by the community for services, information, advice and referrals. They operate on a 'no wrong door and person-centred' approach, where all individuals who come to the centre are helped to navigate to an appropriate response.

<sup>5</sup> Details of LCSA NCC Censuses and services delivered by NCCs can be found on the LCSA's website

Researching local needs and aspirations and designing and developing appropriate service responses in consultation with the community and other partners is a core activity of NCCs. Some of these services will be directly delivered by the NCC while others may be delivered by other NGOs or in partnership.

However, direct service delivery to individuals and families is often the bulk of NCC work (and income) and some have gained accreditation to deliver specialist services such as aged care, childcare and disability services.

Having a local, low-cost venue in the community provides a base for other community organisations to deliver services including self-help groups, social action groups, pro-bono professional help and other NGOs. Delivering services locally makes them more accessible and enables community members to develop support networks, helping to break down social isolation and loneliness.

Externally funded services delivered by NCCs usually require measurement for compliance purposes. Building in comprehensive data collection into the design of a service is key to be able to measure effectiveness as well as identifying ongoing needs and aspirations.

### **Responding to Crises (Individual and Community)**

Being locally based and with strong community networks and partnerships, NCCs are nimble and can act quickly in response to a crisis. They respond to crises in two ways: at a personal level when an individual or a family is experiencing temporary or ongoing hardship; and at a community level when the whole community is experiencing a crisis such as a natural disaster or dealing with the impact of a shut-down of a local industry.

When people face problems, they turn first to families or friends and NCCs are an extension of this support. NCCs take a 'trauma informed care' approach that recognises and responds to the impact of trauma on an individual and provides a safe and supportive environment.

They provide a safe place where community members know they are welcome and will be responded to in a non-judgemental way. NCCs can provide emergency cash, food or clothing; personal support and referrals to informal supports like a youth group, parent support group or transport service; or referral to more formal specialist services such as mental health, housing or domestic violence support.

NCCs also respond to communities in crisis through natural disasters like bushfires or floods or other significant events that impact on the well-being of a community. These could be the COVID 19 pandemic, a multi-death traffic accident or the closure of a major employer in the community.

NCCs partnership and networking approaches means they are well positioned to work with other agencies to respond to these crises effectively.